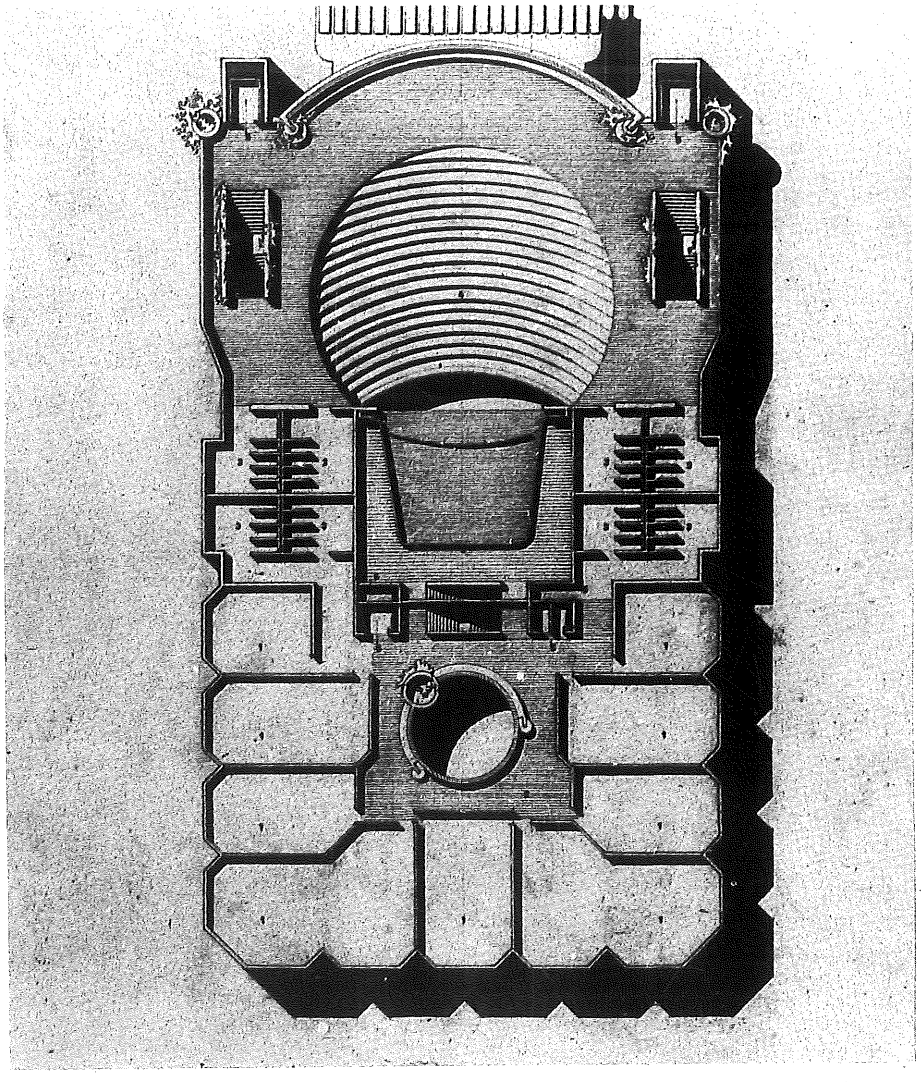
Competition for the Principal Theater, Burgos, 1967. Antonio Fernandez Alba and Julio Cano Lasso. Plan.



The Modern Adventure of Spanish Architecture, 1949-1970

Antón Capitel

To understand the recent history of Spanish architecture it should be seen in comparison with the rest of European architecture as well as through its own special nuances and characteristics. By the end of the 1920s, modern European architectural production finally came to be accepted in Spain. But this popularization—due to international travel and, above all, to abundant reportage on the new—did not ensure that Modern Architecture as such (with certain Catalonian exceptions) would ever be fully embraced by Spain.

The best work of the period involved an aesthetic revision which deliberately distanced itself from the more avant-garde models. Since this production was not an architecture derived from modernist masters and modern tendencies it did not consolidate into a strict variation of the International Style. The young architects of those years were heirs to an old classical tradition, belatedly updated through the "Beaux Arts" academic system, and transformed into a highly eclectic style by their immediate elders. With a rigorous will they combined the inherited academicism with new ideas, forms, and structural systems drawn from modern production.

Therefore, with the exception of the well-known GATEPAC group and of a few individual personalities (who were active as early as the 1930s), the development of Spanish architecture before the Civil War tended more towards a search for a modern academicism—Classicist, constructionist, and *fin de siècle*—than towards a deeper transformation. Traditional considerations and new aesthetics (among them the urban form of the moderate Expressionists, and the vocabulary of Art Deco) resulted in diverse architectures. Some of the more ambitious work was related to American and English tendencies prior to the International Style, as well as to those of the rest of Europe, which flourished even when somewhat obscured by the fascination with the publicity of the avant-garde. This fascination spread throughout Spain, and served as encouragement to the Spanish followers of the modernist European doctrines.

It is during this state of development that the Civil War broke out. Three years later—after the triumph of General Franco's rebel faction—the Basque-Madrid architect, Pedro Muguruza founded the *Dirección General de Arquitectura* (Ministerial Department of Architecture), within the structure of the new regime. Based on the exultant nationalism of the period, he proposed a state architecture which rescued the ideas of the eclectic period of the first three decades of the century. State architecture, or Spanish architecture, since the whole of society was to abide by its intentions, was bound to the yoke of historicism and the so-called "Spanish" styles, a practice which, in fact, continued an existing tradition. All works were to be done in a "historic" key, although with a more disciplined undertone, a vestige of the pre-war modernization.

Most architects practiced the styles which were in fashion—that of Juan de Herre, Baroque, Academic, Vernacular—transforming them into a language with which they dressed their neo-traditionalist, academic, or even occasionally modern plans. This was done with the indifference of the old eclecticism, which saw to it that the organization of the plan and the stylistic aspect were as independent from each other as possible. It was already an anti-modern reaction, a primitive post-Modernism, done in the cynically scenographic manner so often found in current work. Some architects, like Antonio Palacios, would develop their own kind of eclecticism, with some very successful results. But these architects were a small minority and being the older generation were the first to disappear. Among the special cases resulting from this resistance to the ideas of the Modern Movement was Luis Moya, whose peculiar personality gave him the opportunity to live out a bizarre classicist adventure through realized projects. The Spanish generation contemporary with the one that consolidated modern architecture in Europe (the generation of Alvar Aalto and Giuseppe Terragni), sustained a historic architecture enforced by circumstances and conventions. The following generation, beginning or ending its architectural education in the difficult post-war years, completely absorbed modern

architecture. In general, while they could not abide the historicism of their elders, they were compelled to submit to the official climate. So their careers began with modernized versions of the historicist style, inspired by foreign examples. Gunnar Asplund, Domincus Bohm, Peter Behrens, Herman Poelzig, and some Italian architects, such as Piacentim Terragni, are among those who influenced the architects who in the following decade would become more thoroughly modern. Others, such as Miguel Fisac, Francisco J. Saenz de Oiza, Francisco de Asis Cabrero, Josep M. Sostres, and Jose Antonio Coderch, looked to vernacular architecture for inspiration. They constituted the avant-garde of a generation that succeeded in raising modern architecture to official status. But this would not happen until well into the fifties.

In 1949, one of these young architects—Cabrero—won the competition for the National Union Delegation Building in front of the Prado Museum in Madrid (p. 32). This marked the beginning of a transition. Cabrero, who had travelled to Italy in 1942, where he met Adalberto Libera and saw the construction of the E.U.R. building, would prove able with this competition to set the pattern for the modernization of official architecture. Cabrero's building won the competition because it was both modern and monumental. It was also, curiously, vernacular. To the layperson, as well as to most architects, it seemed to be a definitive modernization. But to Cabrero's generation and the ones to follow, set as they were on the late consolidation of modern architecture, it still appeared as a hybrid, a false academicist modernization. No one followed his trail, and he himself turned to more modern ways. The building, reminiscent of the architecture of the Mussolini era, designed by an architect committed to Franco's regime, and housing the official Workers Union, was branded fascist, and to this day retains that reductive label.

The National Union Delegation Building may be seen as a condensation of what Spanish modernism had to break with, summing up the two decades of modernity which would serve as a preface to the very different work of the seventies. In the next two decades, Spanish architecture would try to make up for lost time, beginning with the denial of the objectives of Cabrero's building; that is to say, Spanish modernism in the seventies rejected the concept of an institutional building serving also as a a monumental urban presence, together with the recuperation of Classicism which this implies. The use of metaphysical figurative elements and the opposition between the frontal symmetry and the urban irregularity of the context were considered to be manifestations of academic decadence that had to be challenged.

On the contrary, the positive sense expressed by modern architecture as a form of perfection, received by the Spanish avant–garde with urgency, paved the way to a strong objecthood, or the idea of building the outside "from the inside." The building thus became an autonomous, detached element, foreign to its surroundings, an impassive statement of modernity. The passionate pursuit of this desired ideal, which would sometimes be stronger than common sense, also suffered rather diverse vicissitudes, some of them highly anti-modern. And, never attaining the promised paradise, this pursuit would end up drowning in the cultural crisis of the late sixties.

But this modern adventure, which can be considered to have begun with the Apartment Building in Barceloneta designed by Coderch in 1951 (p. 36), would not triumph officially until 1957, when the International Style was sanctioned as an official architecture of the state. That is, when the style was already so triumphant and hegemonic in the Western world that it was already contested or revised by critics such as Bruno Zevi, who proclaimed organic architecture as the true modern architecture towards which the International Style should evolve. The Spanish Modern Movement which consolidated itself in these years started from this contradiction. It would, on the one hand, embrace a true modern architecture—an International Style—and, on the other hand, accept an informal evolution of any attitude and begin to participate in the organic revisionism to which the style

was now subject. It simultaneously assumed two different *modus operandi* belonging to different periods, firstly, that of the forming of the modern revolution linked to a European era already passed, and secondly, the period of contemporary organic revisionism.

But the little time the architects had in which to act made them unaware of the contradictions they were assuming, and led them to perceive and feel that there were no contradictions in the form of the modern ideal toward which they strived.

The Apartment Building in Barceloneta—an early example of this period—is expressive of what has been discussed. Its elegantly informal modern plan, the anti-urban language of its louver-wall, which gives it such an abstact appearance, and the way in which the volume appears to have been derived from the plan disposition, all refer to the modern, objective, and abstract modes of the building. But the urban volume given to the final profile by virtue of the cornice and the base, or even the geometry of the plan, so empirically plastic and revisionist in character, demonstrate how in its beginnings Spanish modernism already combined such diverse elements. The relationship of Catalonia to Italian culture, especially that of Milan, is very evident in Coderch's case.

In spite of these initial moves, the Spanish architects of the fifties tried to propose an orthodox modernism, and it was not until the following decade that the search for a true modernity followed different routes. Throughout those initial years, each author worked in personal directions, and a school as such was never really consolidated. Having observed the style of the early Coderch, it is interesting to point to the case of Sostres, who expressed his idea of modernity in the Agustí House of 1953, a work which was a sophisticated rationalist exercise. (p. 40).

The Madrid architect, Alejandro de la Sota, of the same generation as the architects mentioned above, would be the one to succeed in making the modern style official, when he won the competition for the Government Building in Tarragona in 1957 (p. 44). Franco's regime was opening towards the Western world, and looking for its place among the concert of nations. It accepted the new architecture as representative of the State. The winning project, by José Antonio Corrales and Ramón Vasquez Molezún, in the competition for the Spanish Pavillion in the Brussels Exposition of 1958, served as a confirmation of this consolidation of the "modern." De la Sota's modernism, although rather strict and even radical, is also very personal and singular. In the Tarragona Government Building, we can observe a sensitive compositional expertise, and an inflexible concern for the expression of a perfect volume which, together with the stony texture of the surface and plasticity of the voids, arrived at a somewhat metaphysical monumentality reminiscent of Giuseppe Terragni. Thus, De la Sota, while remaining a faithful exponent of the International Style, also represented everything that was idealist or Platonic in the movement by virtue of his purist aesthetics and subtle monumentality. All this would place his work, together with that of Cabrero, in a much more individual and marginal position, although in De La Sota's case it was a stance of greater popularity. The work of both these architects would be revalued by subsequent generations, some of whom are presented in this exhibition.

In a continued discussion of what it meant to be a modern architect in the Spain of the fifties, the work of Saenz de Oiza must be mentioned. Saenz de Oiza was set on emulating the pioneers, measuring himself against them, and striving in his work to be more faithful than the masters themselves to the motto of *function, technology, and society.* Among the modernists his work was stricter, colder, and in many respects the least compositional. He was almost mathematical in deriving his expression from technology. Saenz de Oiza, together with Jose Luis Romany, was only able to realize his ideas in low-cost housing, and in this field his accomplishments were significant. His technological and functional puritanism led him to assume a position close to

1 Spanish Pavillion, World Expo, Brussels, 1958. José Antonio Corrales, Ramón Vazquez Molezún. Interior detail.

2 M.M.I. House, Barcelona, 1958. Josep M. Sostres. Exterior detail.

3 Ugalde House, Barcelona, 1952. José Antonio Coderch. Exterior detail.

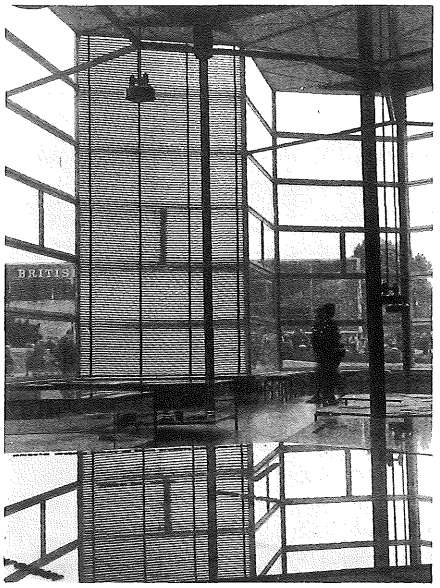
4 Lucio Muñoz House, Madrid, 1963. Fernando Higueras. General view from below.

5 Convent of El Rollo, San José Salamanca, 1969. José Antonio Fernandez Alba. Axonometric.

6 "Virgen del Pilar" Dwellings, Madrid, 1949. Asis Cabrero. General view

7 Project for a chapel on the Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela, 1958. Francisco J. Sáenz de Oíza, J. Romani.

8 Monfort School, Madrid, 1965. Antonio Fernandez Alba. General view.



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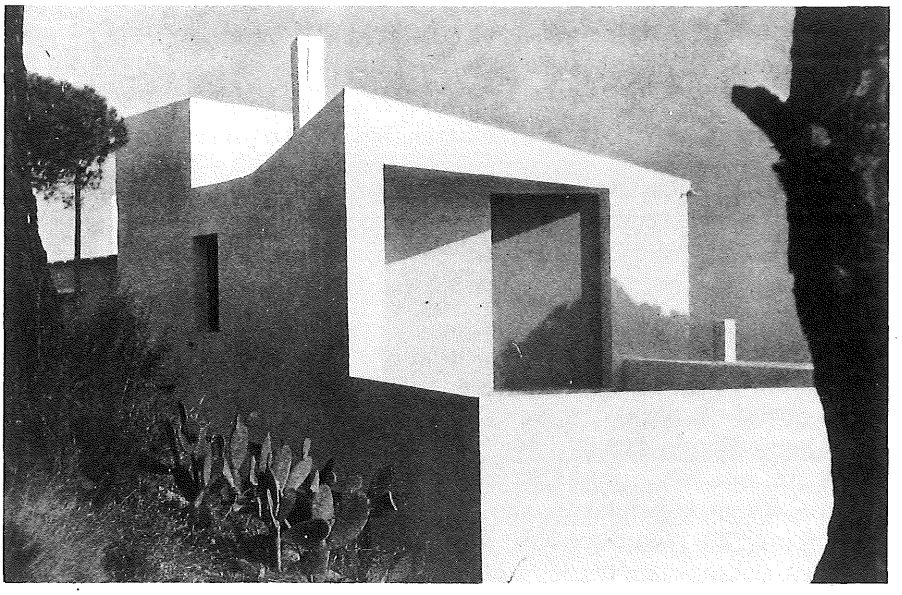

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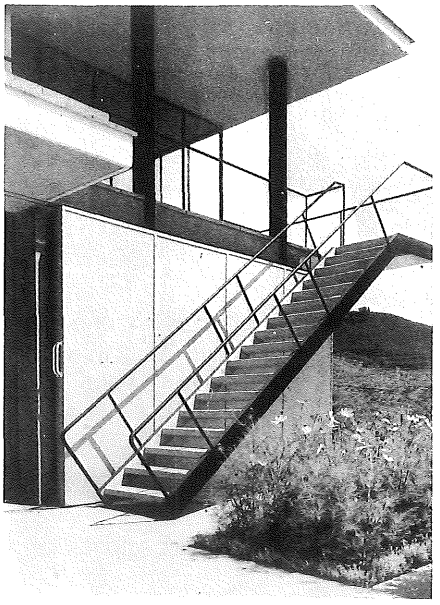

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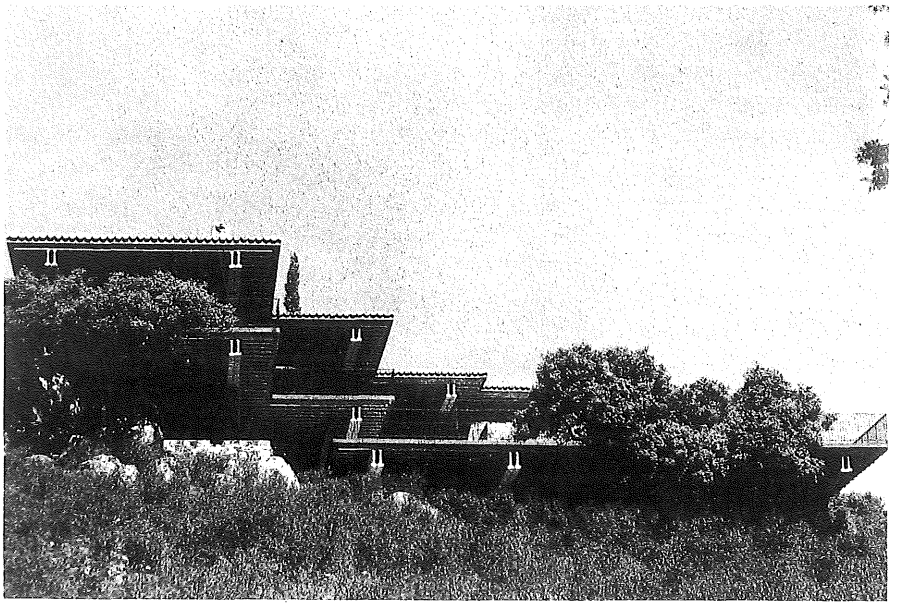

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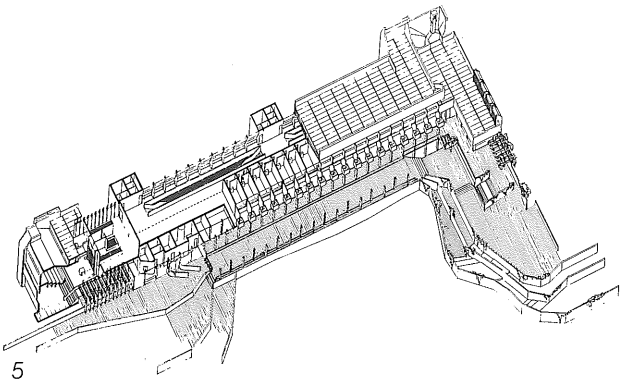

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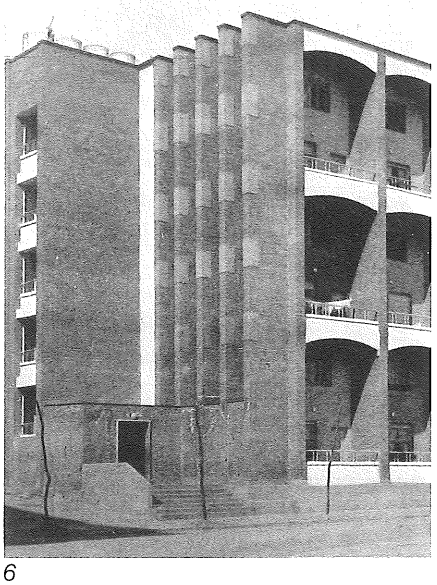

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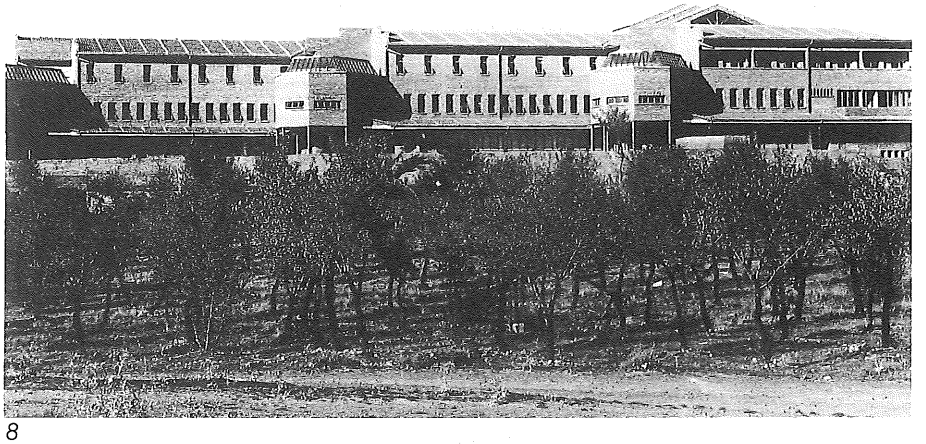

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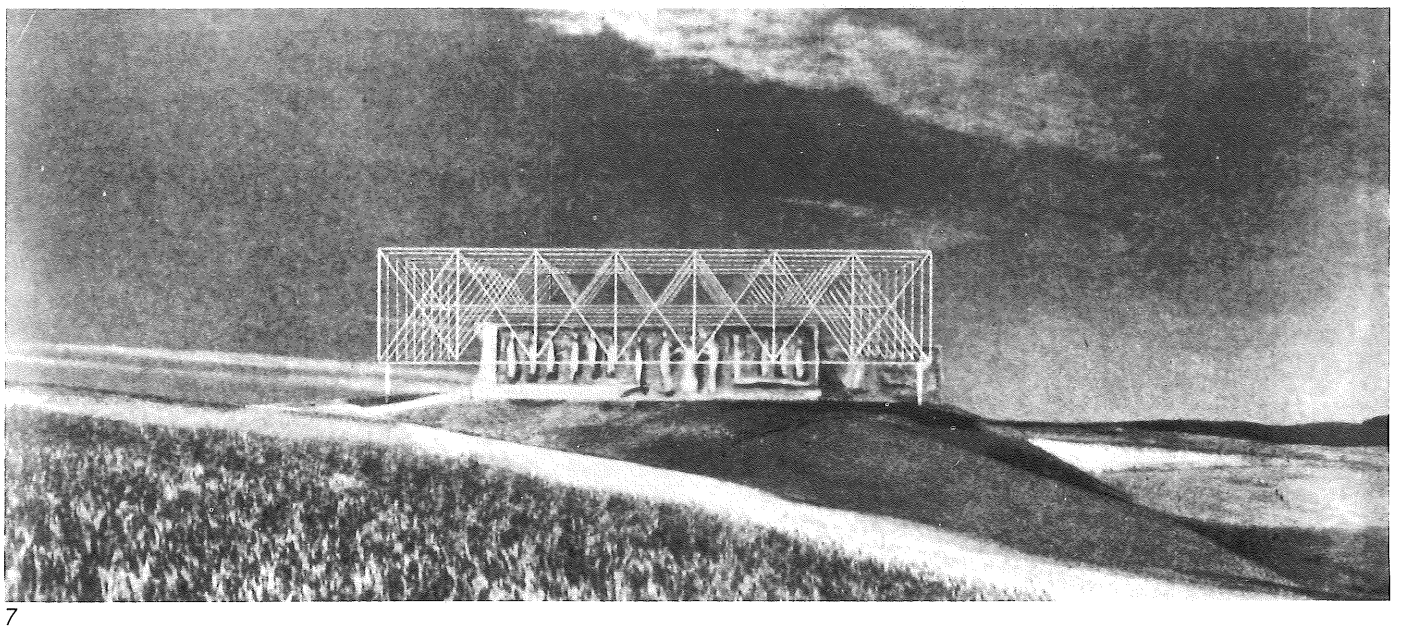

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that favored by the British critic Reyner Banham, although the vicissitudes of the Spanish adventure would lead him to assume different postures, as will be pointed out later.

The last generation reached by this initiation into modernity is that of Corrales and Molezún, designers of the Spanish Pavillion in Brussels, in which the beginnings of the organic revision can already be discerned. Molezún is also the designer of the Herrera del Pisuerga High School (1958), a sophisticated building which incorporates a highly charged quotation taken from Konstantin Melnikov's Paris Pavillion of 1937, including the plastic objectivity of its relation to the surrounding context (p. 48). Nevertheless, the value accorded to pitched roofs announces the emerging organic revision. The Herrera del Pisuerga School is a curious testimony of the avant–garde will which characterized the Spanish adventure.

To the Spanish architects who continued in this direction the promised paradise of modern architecture was located beyond the horizons of the International Style. The obsession with progress and perfection as derived from the modern mentality was suppressed. Instead, there was a strong Spanish response to Zevi's opinions, which saw organic architecture as a mature and true modernity. Thus, the road towards the promised Eden changed its orientation. Organic criticism was decreed official, and Frank Lloyd Wright's and Aalto's work, as well as the development of modernity so clearly expressed in Le Corbusier's later work, rapidly connected with the sensitivity of Spanish architecture, the latter moving rapidly from enthroning the International Style to passionately pursuing the organic ideal. But this organic ideal, as can be seen in many international examples, embodied two different ways of understanding architecture. This ambiguity also underlay the work of the above mentioned masters and it implied a double alternative to the International Style.

The first of these alternatives was more closely aligned with certain anti-modern features. In Spain this was closely linked to the idea of tradition and the desire for a specifically Spanish culture. It was also derived from an interpretation of Aalto's career in terms of crafts, the vernacular, and tradition. The second approach unequivocally championed Italian culture, be it Roman or Milanese, depending on whether the reference is to Barcelona or Madrid. This alternative implied a more moderate way of understanding modernity, proposing the continuity of craftsmanship and building, as opposed to technology. It involved a reconsideration of Spanish history interpreted in a modern key, the consequences of which were a change in architectural language and aesthetics. Where previously one found Cubism, primary colors, flat roofs, ribbon windows, and pilotis, among other elements, one now encountered traditional silhouettes and vernacular myth, traditional roofs and materials, and even the use of compositional resources derived from academicism. As we can see, the revision of modernity came a mere four or five years after it was first introduced, although at the time it was not seen as a revision but as a progressive step, an enrichment that brought positions closer to the promised paradise of a true Spanish Modernism.

The work of Antonio Fernandez Alba responded to this first alternative. He obtained his architect's degree in 1957, and is an important member of the generation that was capable of reorienting the preoccupations of the "Madrid School" towards an organic goal. He was supported by official criticism in 1962, when he designed the Convent for Carmelite Nuns in El Rollo, Salamanca, which was given the National Prize for Architecture (p. 60). The Convent is expressive of the change in orientation which had taken place. In the "Barcelona School," this tendency would be somewhat less traditionalist and would be more related to the Italian experience of Ernesto Rogers's generation and thought. While Madrid, curiously, tended more towards Aalto and the Amsterdam School.

An outstanding example in Barcelona is the large apartment building on Meridiana Avenue (1964) by Josep Maria Martorell, Oriol Bohigas, and David Mackay, whose initial work

was based on the International Style (p. 64). The extension of the Godó y Trias Factory (1964) by Federico Correa and Alfonso Milà, also in Barcelona, was even more polemical at the time, for the use of what were considered to be historicist sources. As a result, from the ideals close to those espoused by Banham (and assumed by Saenz de Oiza in Madrid only a few years before), there was a precipitous shift in the direction of Rogers. And the international polemics which they both represented regarding the Torre Velasca (1961) designed by the latter, served as a representation of the extreme positions of two very active parts of European culture, England and Italy. It also serves to summarize the Spanish attitude, always sensitive to both influences. Although they were separated by an historical polemic, Banham and Rogers still represented two aspects of the same project: Modern Architecture. The entire European scene, comprising different countries, groups and individuals, was to be affected by this split between modernity and anti-modernity. The Spanish movement as a whole as well as the work of individual personalities were a decisive confirmation of this divided condition.

Nevertheless, in the Madrid area, architects working with the organic ideal would adopt yet another position, which was not linked to historicism or tradition and which made pretense to a greater continuity with the International Style. It entrusted the qualities of a modern architectural language and space with the further development of the International Style. Those architects who developed the initial version of the organic ideal were affected by this revision. Thus there was, as in the international scene, another division, although of secondary importance. In Madrid, this other version of the organic ideal was felt, in its brief reign as a proponent of a true modernity, to be a progressive and even more advanced position. It involved an assumption of the *late-organic* position, which for Spaniards was represented mainly by Jörn Utzon's Sydney Opera House and by the more spatial works of Eliel Saarinen. The later works of Wright, from the Johnson Wax building to his more rigorously modern work, also played a decisive role. All were works which defined the path to modernity as the development of a new spatial and plastic language which was sometimes indebted to sculpture.

Thus, Spanish architecture on the road towards an unattainable modernity, zig-zagged in its search, reflecting the evolution of Western architectural thought. The expression of this vertiginous history is evidence of the unavoidable contradictions that marked the attempts to define modernity. The contradictions were especially marked in Spain, for the expression was condensed in time and it therefore revealed curious paradoxes.

An important example of how those contradictions were sometimes embodied in a single work is the Torres Blancas (1966), a masterful and unique work of late Spanish organicism, designed by Saenz de Oiza, the very architect whose work had hitherto adhered with strict loyalty to orthodox modernist principles (p. 72). The Torres Blancas is important not only because of its spectacular qualities or its testimony to a particular historical moment. Rather, its importance lies in the peculiar eclecticism—or *syncretism*—and extreme ambiguousness which pervade its form. These qualities made it, in its day, both the greatest admirer of modernity and its major contestor—depending on which type of modernity was invoked, an issue which was perfectly clear for professionals of the time. The characteristics of the modern Spanish adventure are superimposed and condensed in this one building, through its incorporation of aspects of different modernities which, under the guise of continuous and progressive development, vied for the hegemonic position of being a "true modern architecture." The design of the Torres Blancas reveals a desire to be loyal to the principles of function and technology, while simultaneously adhering to an organicist, expressionist, and sculptural architectural language. The design started from a Corbusian scheme, the tower in the landscape. It is a vertical garden, an island, or a stranded ship, combined with concrete functionalism. That is to say, its dwellings are based on the duplex scheme of the "Immeuble–Villa," and are

exposed to the "essential joys." But, as we can see through the successive design sketches, the Tower also aspired to an organic Wrightianism, with a communion between form and structure, as in the Price Tower (1953). It wanted to go a step further, both materially and figuratively, which would bring it closer to *both at the same time:* to the developments of Le Corbusier's career and of the Taliesin Studio in its final days. Finally, it also sought an affinity to the sculptural and exacerbated language of late-organicism, to the language of architects like Utzon, Saarinen, or Paul Rudolph. The superimposition of all of these issues constituted, whether consciously or not, the dense synthesis which produced this work, now so characteristic of the Madrid skyline.

But in fact, it differs from a synthesis in that it is as if the three models used in the configuration of the tower had been layered into it. The three towers co-exist in a single one: the final tower deriving from late organicism has not obliterated the other two that precede it. Rather, it has incorporated them, giving the tower its final form. Three different modernities are held together by an eclectic mentality which, nevetheless, considers itself pure, since it pursues a "true" modernity. At the time, when this synthesis was being realzed it may have seemed as though the promised paradise was not too distant. Late organicism continued after the Torres Blancas in competitions and projects, but very little of it was ever built. The mirage of an advancing paradise began to fade away, generating a deep crisis in Spanish architectural work and thought which would not be clearly articulated until the 1970s, in the positions represented by the younger architects included in this exhibition.

As far as organicism is concerned, the only version of it to emerge gracefully from the crisis is the more traditionalist version previously discussed, which was assumed both in Barcelona and Madrid by the generation that followed Bohigas and Fernandez Alba. Fernando Higueras, Rafael Moneo, and Luis Peña represent that third generation in such successful works as Peña's Entzuz Houses in Motrico of 1965 (p. 68). Architects of the preceding generation such as Corrales and Molezún, would also work in a similar direction. But to a large degree this attitude represented an anti–modernity. The influence of Louis I. Kahn, whose presence can be felt in some of Alba's works and in certain works by the younger generation, contributed to this position. Together they constituted a position opposed to modernity, a position which anticipated the preoccupations which would become central in the seventies.

Nevertheless, a new interest in orthodox modernism would separate these two stages. The crisis of organicism brought to the fore two men of the first generation, Cabrero and De la Sota. They had each built a major work in 1962, both of which displayed loyalty to modern principles: a building for the newspaper *Arriba,* and a gymnasium for the Maravillas School (p. 52). With the latter work De la Sota produced a very personal and mature modern statement, anticipating a spatiality not unlike that of James Stirling, and continuing in a career which was to have a decisive influence on the generations who worked in the seventies. The young architects of the new generation, who saw De la Sota as the champion of Modernism, had great esteem for his subtle manner and his metaphysical Platonism. In their admiration they rejected the organic tendency and valued the primitive modernism of a rationalist mannerism which was incarnate in the work of De la Sota. Nowadays, in spite of post-Modernism and the profound changes that Spanish architecture has gone through, the influence of De la Sota is still evident and we can find more than one example of it in the works of the seventies presented here.

But it was not only the younger generations who would be drawn to this recuperation of primitive modernism. Saenz de Oiza, in designing an office tower for the Banco de Bilbao (1969-1979) in Madrid seemed to "pay" for the "sin" of his organic and Baroque Torres Blancas with an orthodox modern structure, an elegant glazed tower, erected when architectural interests had already taken a different direction (p. 118). This work together with others by De la Sota, represent the best of late Spanish modernism. The same

can be said of some Catalan buildings, like the Banca Catalana of Barcelona by Enric Tous and Josep Maria Farga (1968), and the late-modern works by Corrales and Molezún, carried out in the late sixties, such as the Bankunion Building on Castellana Avenue, in Madrid (1972).

For the men of the fifties, then, it was easier to connect with the new interests of the seventies. The overlapping of Rationalism and Classicism partly explains this connection. Such works as the Cesar Carlon Student Dormitory in Madrid by De la Sota (1967), or the French Institute in Barcelona by Coderch (1973), are designed as formal statements closer to those of the younger architects.

Cabrero did not have the opportunity to build interesting work towards the end of the decade, but his earlier achievements and especially his Union Building of 1949, would be better understood and valued at the beginning of the seventies than at the time of its construction. It is as though Spanish architecture had taken a step backward in history, ironically depicting a compositional symmetry. Thus, the modern adventure faded out without reaching its final objective, and with the extinction of Modernism a compositional, urban, and monumental architecture came to be appreciated again.

The building for Bankinter (1973), by Moneo and Ramon Bescos, serves both as a threshold of the seventies and as a link with the preceding situation, rupturing the principles on which the modern adventure had been based. The urban and compositional preoccupations of Bankinter, its conscious eclecticism, and its revealing of precedents, gave it a leading role in the epoch to follow. This is an epoch in which modern Spanish architecture becomes at one and the same time our own heritage and a thing of the past.